

# **The Strings on David's Harp Religious Ritual as Container for Spirituality**

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso

## **Abstract**

Religion and spirituality have often been defined over against each other. The spontaneous, emotional and experiential nature of the spirit has been seen as preferential to the structured, fixed, and predictable nature of religious ritual. Religion education for children has moved away from the performance of ritual behavior toward creating an environment to nurture the innate spiritual nature of children. This paper questions whether the pendulum has swung too far, neglecting rituals that have sustained religious and communal life for generations, and considers ways of reimagining traditional ritual as a way to encounter the spirit and build community.

## **Key Words**

Religion and Spirituality- complementary

Ritual as liturgy, gesture, eating, story

## **Biography**

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## **The Strings on David's Harp - Religious Ritual as Container for Spirituality**

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Religion and Spirituality are often defined over and against each other. The spontaneous, emotional and experiential nature of spirit is seen by some as preferable to the structured, fixed and predictable nature of religious ritual. In recent years, the religious education of children appears to be moving from the details of doctrine and ritual behaviors towards the cultivation of a more spontaneous expression of spiritual experience.

Has the pendulum swung too far, neglecting the rituals that connected communities through time (over the generations) and through space (over geographical boundaries)? How might we reimagine traditional ritual not as dead relics, but as life-giving, a way to encounter spirituality and build community?

King David is credited with writing the Psalms. In Psalm 119 he proclaims: "I arise at midnight to praise you." How, the rabbis wondered, was David able to get up at precisely midnight every night? They answered: "David would hang his harp above his bed, and at midnight God would send a breeze through his window to strum its strings. Upon hearing the music, David would rise to praise God by composing the beautiful poetry of the Psalms." (Chen, David as quoted in David Wolpe 2004)

A modern Rabbi, upon studying this rabbinic insight, asked: "What good is it, if the wind blows, but above your bed no harp hangs?"<sup>i</sup> In a similar vein, the great modern philosopher, Emanuel Levinas imagined the sacred text as stretched on the tradition like "the strings of the viola." (Levinas 1993)<sup>ii</sup>

Spirituality is the breath that blows through the windows of our souls. Ritual, the reading of the sacred text and the recitation of liturgy, are like the strings of the harp and the viola. Without the viola, without the strings, there would be no music.

The breath of God blows through our children's lives. What is the harp that we hang above their beds? What is the viola over which we stretch the narrative strings of tradition so that their souls can make music?

***What is spirituality and how does it differ from religion?***

I understand spirituality as a mode of living in the awareness of the divine presence, the sacred. It is a recognition of the transcendent, the interconnectedness of all life. The spiritual life is rooted in experience, in encounters with the self, with others and the world. It's the realization that where we are is no coincidence that we are in the places we inhabit, with the people we meet, to redeem the holy sparks there.

Religion is the container for this life of the spirit. It is the gravity that anchors spirit to earth, translating the vision of the soul into the responsibility of the individual. Margaret Mead observed that ritual is concerned with relationship, whether with the supernatural or among other individuals who share a common experience. Especially for children, rituals serve as links to the intense emotions of the past, as connections to a community through time and space.

Opposites are best when matched: love and power, faith and doubt, seriousness and play religious ritual and spirit. Love without power is sentimentality. Power without love is cruel. Faith without doubt is dishonest, and doubt without faith is cynicism. Ritual without spirit dies and spirit without ritual evaporates.

When Moses ascended Mt. Sinai, he had a spiritual experience. For forty days and forty nights he lived in the presence of the Divine. It was an encounter of indescribable magnitude.

The Biblical text tells us that when Moses descended from the mountain his face glowed. The container for Moses' vision was the Ten Commandments, the covenantal relationship between a people and their God. Moses' forty days and nights on Sinai was a "spiritual" encounter; the Decalogue was the embodiment of that spirit, in other words, "religion".

In the best of all possible worlds, spirituality and religion are handmaidens. The soul's most profound experiences with a presence greater than the self are given form and articulation through liturgy, ritual and moral law. Religious forms, in turn, remain constantly open to the renewal of sacred moments.

But the world is not always at its best. Religion, at its worst, faces the danger of forgetting the spark that ignited it. It becomes a container without a soul, an empty shell, dead ritual.

Spirituality, at its worst, faces a danger as well, the danger of ethereal weightlessness, of self-absorption. Spirit without a body is bound to evaporate. A spark without kindling dies. Sinai without the Ten Commandments is just another mountain.

If spirituality, at its best, lifts us up, religion, at its best, keeps us rooted. If spirituality is what happens with our individual souls, religion is what happens with others in the community.

Spirituality speaks of self-transcendence, the religion of responsibility. Spirituality reminds us of our capacity for revelation, enlightenment, a sense of God's presence. <sup>iii</sup>Religion is what carries us through the valley of shadows, when we are neither uplifted nor empowered and God's presence seems hidden.

Spirituality honors our commonality. We all seek transcendence, a divine spark, a sense of sacred purpose. Religion honors our differences. It recognizes that we require a variety of

containers, languages to carry the spirit. God may be everywhere, one and the same, but we are not.

If religion is to be compelling, if it is to speak to our children where they are, it will need to be attuned to the spirit of the child. If spirituality is to have meaning, able to be shared, and transmitted to a new generation, it will need grounding, a structure to hold it gently and a toolbox to translate it into human accountability.

Spiritual experiences are mute. The language we use to talk about them comes from the community in which we grow and the education we receive.

Religion can test spiritual vision in the crucible of community and history. Spirituality can keep religion from forgetting the experience that once formed its story. Religion keeps spirituality from selfishness; it reminds us of our obligations. Spirituality keeps religion from absolutism; it reminds us that the breath of God blows through each and every human soul.

Our propensity for putting everything into neat categories has us view the religious and spiritual life as opposites. That is an unfortunate mistake. As body and soul are united, so religion and spirit are partners. We divorce one from the other at our own peril.

Ritual activity takes many forms – as liturgy, as gesture, as ceremonial foods, and as story.

### ***Ritual as Liturgy***

Often rituals are seen as mechanical actions that are essentially performed without much thought. They are done reflexively. Children may grab their favorite blanket to soothe themselves to sleep, but they would not think to speak a liturgical formula unless schooled in its recitation. In the Jewish tradition we teach children from infancy how to recite the biblical verse known as the Shema, the affirmation of faith. Jews are supposed to die with these words on their

lips. *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai Echad. Hear O Israel, the Eternal is our God the Eternal is One.*

It is not necessary to fully comprehend the Hebrew words for the recitation have power. Their routine repetition responds to an essential need. It serves to bridge the gap between two existential moments, the state of being awake and unconscious sleep, which in premodern times was seen as a state of near death. Teaching children to recite the Shema in the evening, helps them gain trust and confidence that in the hours of sleep they are protected, that God accompanies us through their unconscious and dream states.

To the pious parent, the Shema is an affirmation of faith that entrusts the child to God's providential protection. But even to the more secular parent, the recitation of the Shema is a statement of identity that links the child and the parents to the historic, spiritual collective of the Jewish people.

To the child, it says that it is safe to let go, that the divine will be with you; you are not alone. To the parent, it says, your child's identity is bound to your people and heritage. It is an affirmation of safety, security and of community, as well as a pledge of allegiance. It allows the participants to connect the individual moment with the experience of an entire culture. The present time connects to eternity.

Rabbinic tradition explains the meaning of the *Shema* in a way that emphasizes the theme of belonging. The rabbis place the first recitation of the *Shema* at Jacob's deathbed. Joseph and his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, assure Jacob (Israel) that even though they are assimilated into Egyptian culture, the Eternal, Adonai, is their God.

Rituals involve performative language which actually brings about real changes in the world. For example, as a rabbi, when I say at the conclusion of a wedding ceremony, '...in

keeping with the traditions of the people of Israel and with the laws of the state, I pronounce you husband and wife”, two people enter into a new status. There is an audible sigh by the guests. When I say a Hebrew blessing over Sabbath candles, mundane time mysteriously morphs into sacred time. A weekday becomes the Sabbath.

### ***Ritual as Gesture***

Rituals involve patterned movements and postures that can serve as ways to embody the spirit.

On Friday evening, as the sun sets, it is customary to light candles, wave your hands over the flames, cover your eyes, and say a blessing. The physical act of bringing Sabbath light inside evokes a strong emotional response.

As rituals serve as a way to navigate change, they also have an impact on those who perform them.

Consider the following examples: kissing a sacred book when it falls, or extending, as Jews do, a fringe of a prayer shawl to touch the Torah scroll as it is carried around the synagogue. These acts are transformative. In a society that easily shreds documents, erases words with the touch of the delete key, and leaves papers scattered on desks and floors, these small, simple gestures embody reverence and respect for the written word.

As people move away from institutional religious affiliation, many see a decline in ritual practice. For some, it is a reason for celebration that rote acts are being replaced by spiritual practices. Keven Schilbrack in his Introduction to *Thinking Through Rituals Philosophical Perspectives* (2004) talks about the way Michel Foucault sees ritual as a technology of self and community-shaping. There is not a decline but a change in style. This remains true today. “The question is not how ritualized the modern world is, but how the modern world ritualizes.”<sup>iv</sup>

Ritual gestures are also ways of paying attention. Driven to distraction by many demands, religious gestures helps to focus our awareness. Take, for example, the mezuzah, the ritual container that is placed on the doorposts of Jewish homes. Inside the cylinder are words from the Torah inscribed on parchment. It is customary to place the mezuzah on the right side, slanted inward toward the home. When we enter our home, it is custom to kiss our fingers and touch the mezuzah. Some believe that the mezuzah is an apotropaic, a device to protect the home from danger. However, even if one does not subscribe to this view, it is possible to see the deeply spiritual power of this ritual movement.

In the Middle Ages there was a debate among the rabbis about how to affix the mezuzah to the doorpost. The great commentator, Rashi believed that it should be placed vertically. His grandson, Rabbenu Tam, disagreed and proposed that it should be placed in a horizontal position. As a compromise, it became the custom to put up the mezuzah slanted into the home. This ritual choreography invites us to remember the need for compromise in order to live together as a family.

Religious rituals, especially when accompanied by story, not only provide the language for expressing spiritual experience but serve as catalysts for creating them.

Not long ago, I taught about the slanted mezuzah to my grandson. After we made a cardboard mezuzah together, I told him to choose the room in his house where the most arguments took place and put his handmade mezuzah on the entrance to that room. The next day we were having a disagreement. My grandson interrupted, touched the mezuzah he had made and said, “Remember the mezuzah!” We stopped arguing and started laughing.

Schilbrack (2004, 24) highlights Peter Van Ness’ suggestion that ritual recitations and gestures are often “nested periodic behaviors” that evoke experiences of the sacred.<sup>v</sup> I love how



this phrase captures the feeling that ritualized behaviors make the participant feel at home, as they have returned to the nest. I use my grandmother's candlesticks to hold Sabbath candles. Our Sabbaths look different than hers but the familiar object connects me with her and family in powerful ways.

Consider again the Sabbath ritual of lighting candles on Friday evening. As parents who are both rabbis, Friday night at our house was not an especially quiet time for us. Instead of a moment to relax from a busy work week, it was the beginning of an intense period of congregational obligation. Nevertheless, we insisted that every Friday night before we went off to services, we would gather as a family, light candles and offer a traditional blessing over our children. What sounds like a potentially beautiful moment, was not always so. We were in a rush, our kids were cranky and as they got older, it seemed to us that they were bored with the practice. I will admit that sometimes I thought this had become a meaningless ritual. When our son went away to college, he called home on his first Shabbat at the university. He asked, "Can we light the candles together while I am on the phone?" At liminal moments, ritual gestures and prayers serve to restore equilibrium. We can know how effective they are when their absence is deeply felt.

In a consumerist culture that moves at breakneck speed, having rituals that require us to turn off our cell phones, to stop from transacting, producing and rushing are revolutionary, forms of resistance. They are needed to give meaning, to connect us with others, something bigger and more lasting than ourselves.

In a recent article in the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, Adrian-Mario Gellel (2018, 17-29) expresses concern about the decline in traditional religious symbols:

... an individualized conception of spirituality that does not connect with the past, which might not use religious language, impoverishes the human dimension. It is for this reason

that one needs to develop symbol literacy that helps children read and make use of symbols among other narratives, artefacts and rituals. This would help them access, construct and experience their own spiritual dimension. ...Spirituality... is accessed and expressed in a richer way through the collective 'symbolic language' of the human community.<sup>vi</sup>

Reason may teach what we ought to do, but not how to do it. Ritual dramatizes how to do it. It asks that we participate in a set of traditional "tools" created long before we were born that transform us and help us make meaning. This includes reinterpretation, trans-valuation and investment of new meaning.

Barabara Feise (2002) <sup>vii</sup> makes an important distinction between routines and rituals. Routines communicate "what needs to be done", while rituals convey "who we are", a sense of identity. Routines involve little afterthought and are recognizable by outsiders; rituals are remembered, extend across the generations and are interpreted by insiders. When routines are disrupted it is annoying, but when rituals are disturbed, group belonging is threatened. Rituals are what Elaine Champagne referred to in her Call for Papers, 'marker beacons'.

Generosity is at the core of the spiritual life. Religious and social rituals that embody this principle are marker beacons. In Jewish tradition, before the start of the Sabbath, many families place coins in a container in recognition of our responsibility to share our means with those in need. The container is called a tzedaka box. Tzedeka comes from the Hebrew word meaning justice. I still recall the little blue metal tzedaka box in my grandparents' kitchen and the sound of coins as they hit the side of the metal container.

There was an ongoing debate between two great Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. Buber believed that it was first necessary to have the spiritual experience in order to perform the ritual. Rosenzweig countered that it was necessary to

perform the ritual to have the spiritual experience. I am inclined to think that there is some truth to both these positions. To force certain rituals on children to which they are recalcitrant, yields mostly rebellion. On the other hand, denying children the beauty of ritual behaviors that have the potential to create spiritual encounters, to give them a language for those encounters, is counterproductive.

We have explored two forms of ritual – ritual as gesture, physical acts of reverence, and liturgical formulas, verbal recitations of shared language. A third form is food associated with food.

### ***Ritual as Eating***

I recall as a child coming home to find my mother in the kitchen and the house filled with intoxicating aromas. I would frequently comment, “It smells like Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. It smells like Passover is coming.” When I had my own children and tried to juggle leading a congregation with family responsibility, I yearned for an aerosol can that contained holiday aromas that I could spray in my kitchen, so that my children would have the same memories with which I grew up. Special festival foods are more than sustenance; they are symbols of significance. Some of the first spiritual experiences are awash in tastes and smells that are long remembered.

### ***Ritual as Story***

A fourth form of ritual is story. Traditional stories connect children to something larger than themselves in ways that help define who they are within a family and culture. They transmit identity and values and provide guidance and healing in hard times.

Every Sabbath, congregations retell the stories of the Torah. Those passages are read from a scroll which is ceremonially carried around the congregation with great pageantry. The

actual readings are framed with opening and closing blessings. It is a ritual form of storytelling. Similar recitations are repeated on Jewish holy days. We tell the saga of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and the story of Jonah on the Day of Atonement. Holidays have stories connected to them: (the accounts of Maccabees and Judith are shared on Hanukah, the tales Esther are read on Purim, the Exodus on Passover, and Ruth on Shavuot). The reading of these narratives is part of a sacred pageantry, replete with accompanying performance rituals. The stories provide the heroes and villains to help us make moral sense of the world.

The stories of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are ritualized through the blowing of the ram's horn, the shofar. The lighting of Hanukah candles becomes an occasion for telling the narratives of the resistance of the Maccabees and Judith. The story of Esther is told while children are invited to blot out the name of the evil villain, Haman, with noisemakers. The Seder ritual concretizes the experiences of the Exodus. Ritual performance helps us remember the story and, in turn, the story is itself ritual. Narrative and repetitive performance are ways of connecting to a larger family and culture. They confer a sense of identity. We share the same stories, hence we belong together.

Even God is seen as a storyteller. The Hasidic sage, Rabbi Bunam, was asked why the first of the Ten Commandments speaks of God brings us out of the land of Egypt instead of the far more miraculous creation of the heavens and the earth. He answered, "Heaven and earth, this is too much for us. God said, 'I am the one who fished you out of the mud. Now you come here and listen to me.'" <sup>viii</sup> In other words, theological reflection or even meditation won't bind you to a covenant, but a story that tells you who you are and from whence you came, will.

## **Conclusion**

At a Children's Spirituality Conference that I attended, the participants were asked to recall the first time they experienced of God. I reached back to a childhood experience. My family would spend summers in Atlantic City near the ocean, not far from our home in Philadelphia. My father worked during the week and joined us for the weekends. On one of his visits he noticed that I did not venture very far into the ocean to jump the waves as I had customarily done. He did not know that early in the week I was toppled by a large wave and was momentarily caught in the undertow. I had come to the conclusion that the ocean was a dangerous place and decided to play nearer to the shore. My father did not ask me to explain my new reluctance. He simply lifted me up in his arms and carried me over the waves until I was no longer afraid to go deeper into the water. I thought of my father's arms as God's arms that carry me over difficulties until I find the courage to stand up on my own.

I am not at all certain that I would have been able to articulate that experience without the story of the Exodus (13:14) I had heard recited at every Passover Seder. "In the days to come when your child asks you, what does this service mean to you? You shall say, 'With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, the Eternal brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.'"

Without the narrative language of ritual, I would not have been able to recapture the experience or to give it expression. When I did recover it, I could smell the salty air, feel the sun, and taste my favorite boardwalk vanilla custard. I could return to that important moment so that it might continue to sustain me. The wind blew, the ritual language were the strings on David's harp, Levinas' viola. It made music in my soul. It has the capacity to do that for all children.

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<sup>i</sup> Chen, David as quoted in David Wolpe. 2004. *Floating Takes Faith: Ancient Wisdom for a Modern World*, Behrman House, 2004, p. 56.

<sup>ii</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. 1993. "The Strings and the Viola" in *Outside the Subject*. Translated by Michael B. Smith. Stanford University Press, p. 174.

<sup>iii</sup> "Thinking Through Rituals Philosophical Perspectives". 2004. edited by Kevin Schilbrack, Routledge, p.24.

<sup>vi</sup> Adrian-Mario Gellel, International Journal of Children's Spirituality, (February 2018, pp. 17-29)

<sup>vii</sup> Barbara Feise. 2002 – *A Review of 50 Years of Research on Naturally Occurring Family Routines and Rituals: Cause for Celebration?* in Journal of Family Psychology, vol. 16, No. 4, 381-390.

<sup>viii</sup> Buber, Martin. 1947. *Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings*. Schocken Books, p. 20